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SUBJECT: AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE FOR KAZAKHSTAN'S ETHNIC  
RUSSIANS

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11. (SBU) Summary: Although they have not suffered the level of upheaval experienced by Russian minorities in other former Soviet republics, Kazakhstan's ethnic Russians face concerns created by their dwindling political influence and the potential long-term ascendancy of the Kazakh language. Some aspects of life have changed little - Russian remains the language of common usage, Russian TV and radio programming flood the airwaves, and Kazakhstan maintains close political, economic, and social links with Russia. Ethnic Kazakhs, however, now enjoy a stranglehold on most positions of political power. Language is a growing issue, with many ethnic Russians worried by the government's new program to make Kazakh the country's dominant language. Recently, a Kazakhstani NGO that helps ethnic Russians to migrate to Russia reported a significant increase in requests for assistance, in large part because of the Kazakh language push. As the country becomes more "Kazakh," Kazakhstan risks marginalizing its ethnic minorities. End summary.

One-Third of the Population, A Much Smaller Fraction of Power

12. (SBU) Kazakhstan's population is currently 15 million, with approximately five million ethnic Russians. From 1992-1998, more than one million ethnic Russians migrated to Russia from Kazakhstan, but in recent years the outflow has slowed to a trickle. The remaining ethnic Russians have not experienced abrupt social change. Russian remains Kazakhstan's dominant language and Russia a major cultural influence. The television station with the highest viewership, Yevrasiya, is an affiliate of Russia's First Channel ORT. Other popular television stations also provide a heavy diet of programming from Russia. Kazakhstan's most widely read newspapers are all published in Russian. The Russian newspapers Moskovskiy Komsomolets and Argumenty i Fakty are both published in Kazakhstan with Kazakhstani inserts, while predominantly covering political, cultural, and social events in Russia. Russian language schooling is an option for most students, except in rural areas.

13. (SBU) The influence of Kazakhstan's Russian minority does not extend deeply into the political sphere, however. Of Kazakhstan's seventeen government ministers, only two, the Ministers of Emergency Situations and Health, are ethnic Russians. (The Minister of Finance is an ethnic Ukrainian.) Thirty-seven of forty-one vice-ministers are ethnic Kazakhs. The situation is little different at the regional level, where only one of the sixteen Oblast Akims is an ethnic Russian.

## From Russian to Kazakh: The Push for Transition

¶4. (SBU) Russian remains the dominant language in Kazakhstan. Approximately 30% of ethnic Kazakhs speak little or no Kazakh, and the native language of most urban Kazakh elites is still Russian. Most of Kazakhstan's other larger minorities, including Koreans, Germans, and Poles, are Russian speakers. In the cities of Kazakhstan, the language of the street is Russian, even among young ethnic Kazakhs. In a 2005 USG-funded poll of 1500 Kazakhstanis nationwide, 70% of those polled elected to do the survey in Russian.

¶5. (SBU) President Nazarbayev, however, is leading a government-wide effort to increase the use of Kazakh. The most recent state budget allocated 35 billion tenge (approximately \$28 million) for Kazakh language program activities, which includes the creation of a commission for the promotion of the government language policy, chaired by Prime Minister Masimov. (Comment: Ironically, Masimov, an ethnic Uighur, does not speak Kazakh fluently himself.) Education and Science Minister Tuyembayev, a PhD in Kazakh philology and the author of several books on the Kazakh language, recently announced plans to open sixteen Kazakh language centers throughout the country. One of the centers' responsibilities would be to test the Kazakh language fluency of government officials. Tuyembayev also stated that students applying for prestigious Bolashak scholarships, a state-run study-abroad program that provided 1756 scholarships last year, will be given preference if they speak Kazakh. (Comment: Very few non-ethnic Kazakhs speak Kazakh, and Kazakh language programs in Russian language schools are poor or non-existent.)

¶6. (SBU) Government ministries are already beginning the Kazakh language push, at least formally, by translating working documents drafted in Russian into Kazakh. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs now prepares most diplomatic

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notes in Kazakh. Both the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Defense have declared that all official documents will be in Kazakh by the end of 2008. Under current plans, all office administrations in regional oblast departments will shift to drafting documents in Kazakh by 2010.

¶7. (SBU) According to the Kazakhstani NGO Slavic LAD (Harmony), the government's increased emphasis on the Kazakh language has led many ethnic Russians to reconsider their future in Kazakhstan. Petr Kuzmenko, Deputy Chief of Slavic LAD, told the press that in January 5,000 people in the Akmolinskaya and Northern Kazakhstan Oblasts sought advice from the organization on procedures to migrate to Russia. He believes that even more are likely interested, because many who came for consultations also represented their neighbors' interests (Comment: While Slavic LAD may have a self-interest in inflating the numbers considering emigration, we have found the group reasonable in past interactions and they are not considered to be radicals.)

¶8. (SBU) Slavic LAD also conducted a telephone poll to achieve a better understanding of the concerns of potential emigres. 97% of those polled responded that the potentially diminished status of the Russian language is a main reason that they are considering emigrating. Many of those polled, noted Kuzmenko, replied that they are not anxious to leave Kazakhstan but feel that the Kazakhstani authorities leave them no choice. One ethnic Russian LES told Poloff that many of her friends are reconsidering their future in Kazakhstan because of the language issue. Ethnic Russians already face discrimination when seeking government work, and the situation will worsen with the new language policy, she said.

¶9. (SBU) Comment: Because of Kazakhstan's heavy Russian influence, a person transported from Russia to certain parts

of Kazakhstan might blink twice before noticing a difference.  
Change, however, is inevitable. Ethnic Russians are already almost completely absent from positions of political power. The government's new language program will strengthen the place of the Kazakh language, although President Nazarbayev recently stated that Kazakhstan must preserve the Russian language. Despite President Nazarbayev's reassurances, early evidence indicates that ethnic Russians will reassess their long-term future in Kazakhstan if they must be bilingual to compete. End comment.  
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